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25 January 1982

DCI WORLDWIDE BRIEFCentral America

Over the past year the radical left has grown substantially and its prospects for eventual victory have improved, especially in El Salvador and Guatemala. Insurgent recruitment efforts have benefitted from local conditions conducive to revolutionary growth; and guerrilla terrorism and attacks on economic targets have made those conditions worse. The radical left's success also reflects a continuing flow of weapons and trained guerrillas from Cuba and Nicaragua. In the face of mounting pressures, however, the threatened governments are proving surprisingly durable, and sentiment in some key Latin American countries is beginning to stiffen against Cuban-sponsored subversion.

In Nicaragua, the Marxist-Leninist Sandinista National Directorate--with Cuban, Soviet Bloc and radical Arab help--has strengthened its control, continued its military buildup, and provided extensive support to insurgents in the region. With 20,000 active duty troops plus a militia reserve force of an additional 20,000, the Sandinistas possess by far the largest military in Central America. Their 25 T-55 tanks provide a strong advantage in armor over their neighbors, and the expected arrival in coming months of MIG aircraft will likewise give them air superiority. The dominant Cuban influence in Nicaragua is reflected in Havana's nearly 6,000 advisers, some 1,800 of whom are military/security personnel. The Sandinistas' mounting concern about raids by anti-regime bands operating largely from Honduras increases the likelihood that Managua will move decisively against anti-Sandinista camps in that country. This preoccupation will also further the recent trend toward stepped-up repression of leading moderates in the private sector, the independent media, and among opposition politicians.

In El Salvador, some 5,000 insurgents remain locked in a war of attrition against government forces numbering 24,000. The failure of last January's final offensive to spark a popular uprising has forced the guerrillas to adopt more modest short-term goals, while counting on economic sabotage, mounting armed forces' casualties, and international condemnation of the junta to tip the balance in their favor over the longer term. The guerrillas' current priority is to disrupt the 28 March elections, and they have recently unified behind a strategy calling for escalating attacks by small units to intimidate potential voters. The government recognizes its vulnerability to such an approach. Nonetheless it is heartened by the recent OAS vote overwhelmingly supporting the junta's electoral plan and correctly sees the elections as an important opportunity to improve its international standing.

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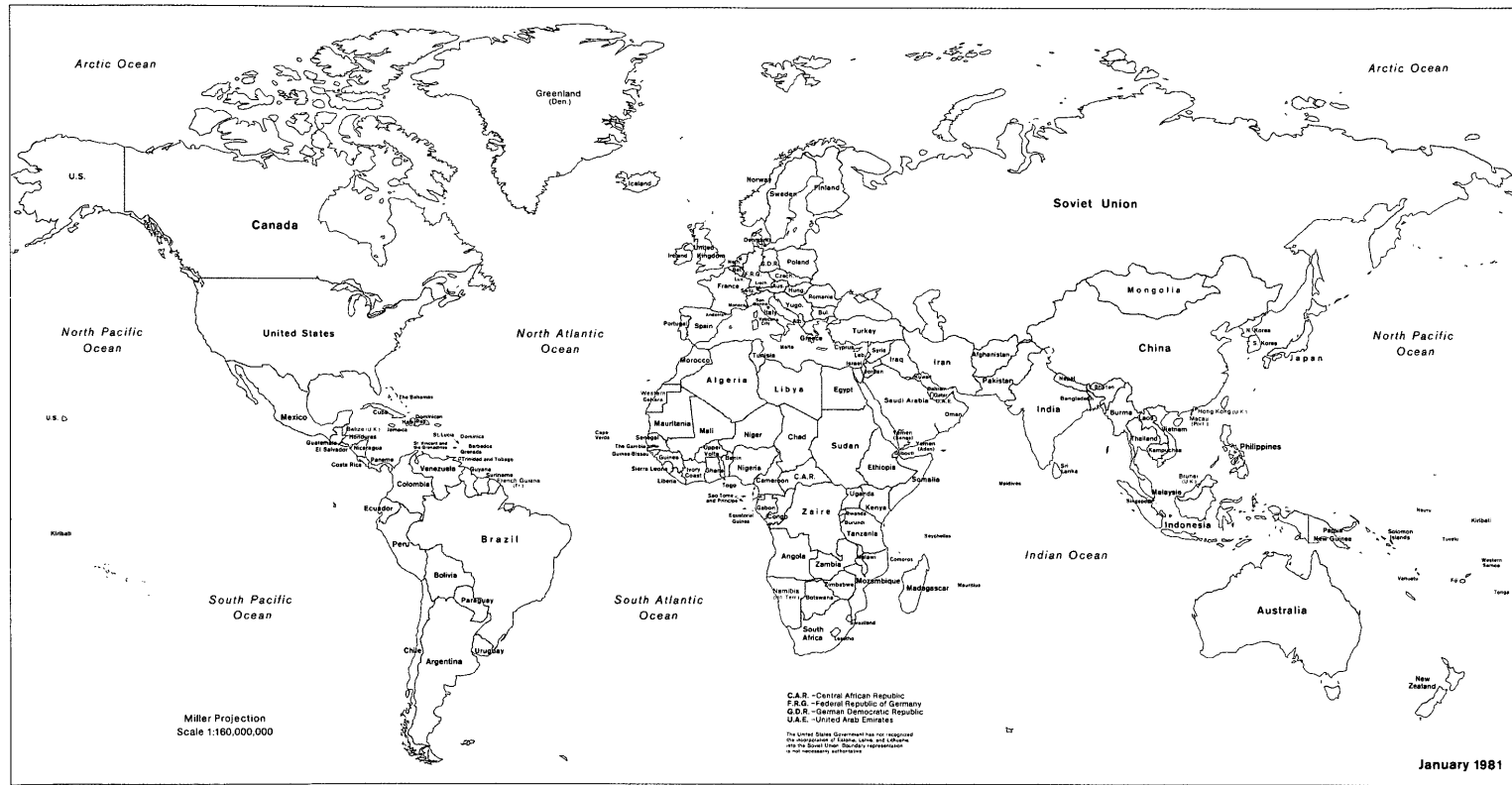
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Guerrilla activity in Guatemala has increased sharply since last fall, reflecting a major growth in the strength of the insurgents, whom we now estimate to number some 4,500. There are also indications that Cuba and Nicaragua are beginning to provide greater support to Guatemalan guerrillas. The mobile tactics employed by the military are producing some successes against the insurgents, but these and other measures taken to date are not likely to reverse the guerrillas' momentum. The Cubans and Nicaraguans are also laying the groundwork for an eventual insurgency in Honduras by pushing for unity among Honduran leftists and accelerating guerrilla training. The impending transition to civilian rule there could be a positive development over the long term, but the initial period of adjustment may represent an additional element of tension in Honduras' already unsettled political climate.

Costa Rica's democratic traditions are being severely tested by the country's most serious economic crisis since World War II and by increasing activity of domestic radical leftists, some of whom have links to Cuba and Nicaragua. Notwithstanding these developments and the continuing spillover effects of regional turmoil, the prospects for more stable presidential leadership following the elections in February make it likely that the country can weather the storm.

In Panama, after an initial period of uncertainty following Torrijos' death, military and political leaders have worked together to maintain the ruling structure. The current leadership will be less sympathetic than Torrijos to Cuban and Nicaraguan troublemaking in the region, will monitor more closely activities by those countries in Panama, and will concentrate on preparations for national elections in 1984.

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